



**GLOBAL  
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# BEYOND IDEOLOGY

VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND  
ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE  
WESTERN BALKANS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**V**iolent extremism and organized crime are deeply intertwined, posing a multifaceted challenge that is underexplored. This research identifies 34 criminal groups that engage in both violent extremist and organized crime activities in the Western Balkans Six (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia). Among these, 24 are violent far-right groups and 10 are violent religious extremist groups. The discrepancy can be partially attributed to the fact that the media in this region have extensively documented far-right extremism concerning organized crime. In contrast, religious extremism has received less visibility and public attention, and consequently has been less addressed by authorities, except in cases related to terrorism.

Regional inter-ethnic tensions have historically given rise to violent ultranationalist groups that have often embraced far-right extremist ideologies as useful vehicles to further their ambitions. Violent far-right groups have established connections with high-ranking government officials, thereby undermining law enforcement and governance. Corrupt politicians, particularly those with nationalist agendas, exploit these groups, in some cases forming quasi-private militias that destabilize the political landscape and empower criminal networks. For example, the alliance between hooligans and deviant factions of state institutions illustrates how local far-right extremists integrate into larger transnational organized crime groups, adversely affecting regional security and facilitating global drug and arms trafficking. The normalization of violence and criminality through these associations undermines social stability, eroding public trust in law enforcement and government institutions.

Regarding violent religious extremism, in the early 2010s, the Balkan region experienced the first manifestation of a gradual religious radicalization that has its origins in the early 1990s, with approximately 1 000 people joining the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.<sup>1</sup> The environment that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, marked by instability, porous borders and paramilitary formations linked to illicit trades, facilitated the rise of radical Islamic groups. Violent religious extremists, radicalized in informal mosques and online by following international terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, pose a significant security risk in the region. These groups are involved in criminal markets, including arms trafficking, drug trafficking and money laundering, primarily for terrorism financing. Addressing these hidden networks and their socio-political roots is essential for preventing future threats and ensuring long-term stability, particularly given the transnational ties between the Western Balkans, the rest of Europe and the Middle East.



Kosovo police carry out search, patrol and control activities after an attack on Banjska led by Kosovo Serb politician Milan Radoičić in September 2023. © Vudi Xhymshiti/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

This study does not aim to create an exhaustive list of documented interactions between violent extremists and organized crime groups, but rather to illuminate the characteristics of the nexus between them and identify systemic vulnerabilities. This report serves as a tool to encourage initiatives at the operational level by advocating for a joint approach to addressing these two phenomena rather than treating them separately.

## Methodology

This report is based on primary qualitative data collected through 70 semi-structured interviews with key experts, including current and former members of violent extremist groups, community leaders (religious and political), law enforcement officials, judicial representatives, political party members and civil society organizations. The interviews took place in person between December 2023 and April 2024. Most participants agreed to be interviewed under conditions of anonymity. Using the collected data, extremist actors in the Western Balkans were identified and categorized based on the nature of their activities. A guiding questionnaire was used to analyze the type and size of these groups.

This research also draws on secondary sources that examine violent far-right and religious extremism, as well as laws, regulations, official documents, news articles and investigative reports addressing this issue.

In the first phase of the study, violent extremist groups were mapped and their levels of violence, access to weapons and territorial control assessed. The second phase explored the links between violent extremism and organized crime, in order to understand whether and how extremist groups interact with criminal actors within the framework of criminal markets, as defined by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s Global Organized Crime Index.<sup>2</sup>

## Working definitions

The identification of these groups and actors was constructed on the following working definitions, drawing on the work of the European Commission<sup>3</sup>:

**Violent far-right extremism:** Individuals, associations or political movements that use, incite, threaten with, legitimize or support violence and hatred to further their political, social, economic or ideological goals, motivated by ideologies based on the rejection of democratic order and values as well as of fundamental rights, and centred on exclusionary nationalism, ethno-nationalism, racism, xenophobia, antisemitism or other forms of intolerance.

**Violent religious extremism:** Individuals, associations or religious movements that use, incite, threaten with, legitimize or support violence and hatred to further their religious, social or political goals, motivated by exclusionary religious beliefs, and based on the rejection of out-group faiths and freedom of worship principles, and centred on intolerance towards all views other than the in-group. ■

## Key points

- **Diverse motivations and relationships.** In the Western Balkans Six, organized crime and violent extremist groups often exploit each other's capabilities for divergent goals. However, regardless of the motives to join forces, the existence of such relationships highlights the dual exploitation of the region's weak governance structures and porous borders.
- **Spectrum of cooperation.** The nature of cooperation between these groups varies in intensity and complexity. On the extreme end, criminals and violent extremists have sustained relationships of trust and may share operational goals. Such alliances blur organizational boundaries and increase both groups' sophistication, creating hybrid threats that are more difficult to dismantle.
- **Risks of partnerships.** While such partnerships offer mutual benefits, they also expose both groups to greater risks, including increased law enforcement scrutiny. Despite a growing recognition among law enforcement agencies of the convergence between crime and extremism across the Western Balkans, the risk remains high in states with limited resources and institutional weaknesses.
- **Broader societal impacts.** The persistence of these alliances in the Western Balkans is deeply rooted in socio-economic challenges, such as high unemployment, political instability and weak judicial systems, which create fertile ground for recruitment. The exploitation of local communities erodes trust in institutions, undermining social cohesion and leaving these regions more vulnerable to destabilization, necessitating that the structural drivers of vulnerability are addressed alongside efforts to combat the hybrid threats.



## INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, studies on the nexus between extremism and criminal acts have mainly focused on religious extremism and terrorism, while interactions and linkages between violent extremism and organized crime remain largely under-researched.<sup>4</sup>

In the Western Balkans, instances of religious radicalization and terrorism began to garner international attention in the early 2010s, when fighters from the region participated in foreign armed conflicts. Between 2012 and well into 2016, some 1 070 nationals from the Western Balkans travelled to Iraq and Syria, primarily to join the ranks of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabahat al-Nusra.<sup>5</sup>

The process of radicalization and the establishment of radical Islamic entities across the Western Balkans is primarily tied to the inter-ethnic wars with religious undertones in former Yugoslavia, the activities of the mujahideen and their networks in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1992–1996 war and after it, and the broader penetration of the region in the socio-economic and political turmoil of the early 1990s by Middle Eastern Islamist ‘charities’ that started the systematic spreading of Salafi Jihadism and indoctrination of Sunni Muslims in the region.<sup>6</sup>

However, the Middle East is not the only destination for fighters from the Western Balkans, nor is religion the sole motivation for joining foreign conflicts. Between 2014 and 2021, some also participated in the fighting in eastern Ukraine for political reasons. It is estimated that approximately 300 foreign fighters from the region travelled to Ukraine during the initial years of the war in the Donbas region. Serbia was among the principal sources of combatants fighting alongside pro-Russian separatists, contributing an estimated 100 men.<sup>7</sup>

Nearly three years after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the trend has been reignited, leading to a new influx of individuals from the Western Balkans joining various factions, particularly in support of the Russian occupiers, including the notorious Wagner Group.<sup>8</sup> While the exact number of men from the Western Balkans who have joined the conflict in the past year remains undetermined, indications suggest that it is larger than the initial wave.

The motives for foreign fighters to join conflicts vary. Some participate for money; others seek a sense of power, control or deviant heroism. But some travel to fight ‘for a cause’ out of solidarity with specific religious or political ideologies.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding the nexus between far-right extremism and violence, the Western Balkan countries are not unfamiliar with such linkages. The region has been plagued by conflict and inter-ethnic tensions since the early 1990s, attracting and producing fighters, traffickers, paramilitary groups, hooligans and extreme nationalists.

There have been numerous attempts to measure the magnitude of the issue. In November 2022, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) published an interactive map that provides detailed information about 17 far-right and extremist groups operating in the region, aimed at highlighting the potential threats they pose to security and the rule of law.<sup>10</sup> In addition to mapping exercises, various studies have demonstrated that right-wing extremism and radicalization result from the complex intersection of recent history, politics and religious institutions.<sup>11</sup> Many far-right organizations and paramilitary groups in the former Yugoslavian countries employ extreme violence as a tactic. They are often motivated by past wars, nationalist resentments, trauma and fear.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the war in Yugoslavia and the collapse of the communist regime in Albania, instability and security threats were also exported abroad. Alongside thousands of displaced people and refugees, criminals began to migrate to Western European countries, including the Netherlands and Sweden, giving rise to what is known there as the 'Yugo mafia', a term referring to criminal gangs from Serbia and Montenegro operating in Northern Europe.<sup>13</sup> Diasporas have facilitated connections among violent extremist groups that span the Western Balkans and extend into Western Europe, where these groups often maintain ties. They are active both online and in offline public spaces, communicating and organizing at national and international levels while increasing their political presence, particularly in the European Union.<sup>14</sup> For instance, in June 2020, between 200 and 300 members of the Turkish far-right paramilitary organization Bozkurtlar (Grey Wolves), which allegedly has an active cell in Bosnia and Herzegovina,<sup>15</sup> attacked a Kurdish feminist rally in Vienna, Austria.<sup>16</sup>

There have been several efforts made to determine the connections between far-right extremism, terrorism and organized crime. In 2019, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2482, which primarily addresses the intersection of terrorism and organized crime. The resolution highlights various organized criminal activities that can benefit terrorists, including money laundering, corruption, human trafficking, the illicit manufacture and trafficking of firearms, drug trafficking, cultural property trafficking, the illicit exploitation of natural resources and kidnapping for ransom. Furthermore, Resolution 2482 emphasizes that the nature and scope of the connections between terrorism and organized crime, whether domestic or transnational, vary by context. It calls upon member states to continue researching and collecting information to enhance understanding of this nexus and improve responses to it.<sup>17</sup>



A mural in Belgrade, Serbia, depicts the Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary organization that has attracted fighters from the Western Balkans to join Russia's war in Ukraine. © Oliver Bunic/AFP via Getty Images



## International approaches to the nexus

Despite the universal purpose of the UN resolution, the governmental approaches of the Western Balkans regarding this issue tend to align with Europol's perspective, which distinguishes between violent extremists and organized crime groups based on their differing objectives. In its 2021 Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA), Europol stated that while organized crime groups primarily seek profit, 'terrorists largely pursue political or ideological aims'.<sup>18</sup>

In Europe, there is generally a lack of information regarding the systematic cooperation between organized crime and violent extremist groups. This may stem from a prevailing belief that the two are reluctant to collaborate, as partnerships are likely to draw increased attention from intelligence and other law enforcement agencies.<sup>19</sup> However, reports from police operations worldwide and research studies indicate that there are indeed incentives for both sides to engage in criminal partnerships. These incentives range from those related to financial trafficking to exchanging information and 'expertise' on police strategies. Additionally, these groups may provide security services to one another and learn from each other's business activities, such as money laundering through real-estate purchases, brothels, gyms, fight clubs and restaurants.<sup>20</sup> Numerous examples from the Western Balkans illustrate this phenomenon, often pointing to a transnational dimension. For instance, many of the weapons used in terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels during the mid-2010s were trafficked to Western Europe from the Balkans.<sup>21</sup>

Another argument frequently raised against the collaboration between extremist groups and organized crime organizations pertains to drug trafficking and consumption. In terms of trafficking, the connections between these two entities are not as perilous for those involved as is often presumed in terms of increased law enforcement attention. On the contrary, such alliances may even prove useful. If law enforcement uncovers illegal activities, the investigative focus will centre on the specific crime and on the people most vulnerable to conviction, often neglecting the extremist political or religious dimensions and the prosecution of leadership figures. In many cases, violent far-right extremists apprehended for organized crime-related offences are likely to be prosecuted only for those offences rather than for terrorism.<sup>22</sup>

Within the far-right scene, particularly among violent extremist groups involved in combat sports, there is a movement that advocates for a strict lifestyle free from drugs, alcohol and tobacco. However, the use of drugs for ideological purposes is not a new phenomenon: it has been observed not only among members of far-right organizations but also among religious extremists. A notable example is the consumption of synthetic amphetamine-type stimulants, such as Captagon, by Islamic State combatants, probably including foreign fighters from the Balkans.<sup>23</sup>

Many of these manifestations have been discussed in regional and international forums, such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum, which convenes international experts, local stakeholders and law enforcement authorities.<sup>24</sup> However, more comprehensive research and detailed data collection are needed to understand violent extremism through the lens of organized crime rather than from the perspective of terrorism.



## OVERLAPS BETWEEN FAR-RIGHT AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

**T**hroughout history, far-right movements have sought to exploit religious identity as a means of mobilizing support and justifying their agendas. This instrumentalization often manifests in framing the preservation of a specific religious or cultural identity as central to their extremist goals.<sup>25</sup> By portraying religious identity as under threat, these movements galvanize their followers to rally against perceived enemies. Far-right groups may selectively interpret religious texts to justify xenophobia, ethnonationalism or anti-immigrant sentiments. The manipulation of religious symbols and narratives serves as a powerful tool for recruiting and radicalizing individuals who strongly identify with their faith.

In areas of the former Yugoslavia, far-right movements explicitly align themselves with either Orthodox Christian or Catholic Christian identities.<sup>26</sup> These movements combine chauvinistic nationalism, xenophobia and mysticism, asserting that their causes are divinely sanctioned. By invoking religious symbolism and divine authority, they seek to legitimize their exclusionary ideologies. Such groups often draw inspiration from biblical narratives to support their claim of a divine mandate to preserve a particular racial or cultural heritage.<sup>27</sup> These strategies have proven effective in deeply religious societies, where faith holds significant sway over cultural and political life.

### The role of violence

There are both similarities and differences between far-right and religious groups in their use of violence. Both types of groups employ violence to demonstrate strength, intimidate opponents and achieve their objectives. For far-right groups, violence often serves as a means of asserting dominance and enforcing particular ideologies within society. These groups may act as proxies for state police, relying on their connections with state institutions to secure protection and legitimacy. This dynamic underscores the dangerous interplay between extremist movements and state complicity.

By contrast, religious extremists – especially in the Western Balkans – often operate independently of state support. Their acts of violence are frequently condemned and prosecuted by the state, highlighting a critical distinction between far-right and religious extremist groups. Violence also intersects with organized crime, as extremist groups frequently engage in extortion, drug trafficking and other illicit activities to finance their operations. This connection illustrates how both far-right and religious extremist groups exploit criminal networks to sustain their agendas.

Ultimately, the degree of state complicity plays a pivotal role in shaping the behaviour of these groups. The greater the level of support from state authorities, the more likely a group is to escalate its use of violence. Conversely, groups operating without state backing often turn to violence as a last resort to achieve their goals, leveraging it as a tool for survival and influence.

## **Anti-Islam sentiment in the Western Balkans**

One notable area of overlap between far-right extremism and religion is the rise of anti-Islam sentiment. This amalgamation of cultural, political and religious identity reinforces the notion that defending one's faith is synonymous with combating perceived external threats. Anti-Islam sentiment is a prominent feature of far-right ideologies, particularly in the Western Balkans, where historical conflicts and cultural divides have amplified these narratives.<sup>28</sup>

In the aftermath of the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, anti-Islam sentiment emerged as a defining characteristic of far-right nationalist movements. In multi-religious contexts such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia, political and religious extremism became deeply intertwined during the war. Unlike North Macedonia, where the predominant ethnic group shares the same Orthodox Christian faith as the Serbs, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo experienced independence movements led by their largest ethnic groups – Bosniaks and Albanians – whose dominant faith is Islam.

This dynamic fuelled the rise of anti-Islam sentiment, particularly among Orthodox Christian Serbs, who viewed the independence movements as a direct threat to their religious and cultural identity. The narrative of defending Christianity against Islam became a rallying cry for hard-line nationalists, further entrenching divisions within the region. Since the end of the war, this sentiment has persisted, continuing to shape far-right ideologies and fuelling local extremist identities.<sup>29</sup>

## **Radical Islam and political extremism**

The intersection of radical religiosity, particularly within Islam, and political extremism has become a central focus of global security discussions. Political extremism framed within the context of radical Islam often distorts religious ideologies to advance political agendas. Religious extremist groups selectively interpret Islamic teachings to justify violence, terrorism and the pursuit of political objectives. By intertwining political aims with religious fervour, they create a potent narrative that appeals to individuals disillusioned with their socio-political environments.

The recruitment of violent extremists from the Western Balkans to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq highlights the intersection between radical Islam and political extremism. Self-proclaimed imams with radical ideologies facilitated the exploitation of political grievances and religious identities by transnational terrorist organizations.<sup>30</sup> This recruitment strategy leveraged local socio-political grievances, enabling these organizations to attract followers from diverse backgrounds.

The rise of social media has further amplified this phenomenon, acting as a force multiplier for extremist ideologies. Through platforms that transcend borders, these groups disseminate propaganda rapidly and target people who feel alienated or marginalized. The global reach of social media has allowed extremist narratives to spread far beyond the immediate region, contributing to the rise of transnational networks of radicalized individuals.



## CRIMINAL PARTNERSHIPS

International and regional organizations, such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and Europol, have addressed the interplay between violent extremism and organized crime. These organizations often posit that the relationship among the actors involved is positive, suggesting that it typically includes cooperation and coordination to achieve specific financial or political objectives. According to the UNODC, for example, there is an 'increasing recognition that terrorists can benefit from organized crime' and that 'the confluence of criminal and terrorist actors enables them to gain stronger capacities to threaten peace, security and economic development'.<sup>31</sup>

Evidence collected for this study suggests that the relationship between violent extremism and organized crime can be understood on a spectrum, reflecting diverse dynamics, motivations and operational patterns. At one end, there is a deep integration of activities, where entire violent extremist groups engage in organized crime or where some of their members – often the leaders – are also involved in organized crime networks. In many instances, this connection is foundational to the group's genesis, causing the distinction between the two phenomena to blur.

A prominent example analyzed in this report is Veljko Belivuk from Serbia, who earned a reputation for violence as a member of the United Force neo-Nazi hooligans group, supporting the Rad Football Club in Belgrade. Belivuk rose through the ranks by engaging in drug trafficking and extortion of local businesses.<sup>32</sup> In 2013, with the assistance of convicted drug dealer Aleksandar Stanković, he seized control of the stands of FC Partizan, another Belgrade-based club.<sup>33</sup> This alliance granted them control over drug trafficking and significant influence within the stadium, enabling the group to orchestrate political chants during games.<sup>34</sup> As explained in the case study below, the Janjičari hooligan group in Serbia, led by Belivuk, exemplifies high-end cooperation between violent extremism and organized crime, where shared strategic goals align control over the stadium domain with control over drug trafficking. Such long-term collaborations necessitate significant trust, resource sharing and the integration of organizational functions.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, far-right extremist groups and organized crime occasionally engage in marriages of convenience, cooperating to achieve specific tactical objectives. These interactions may occur without any alignment with broader strategic objectives, and the lack of structural connections often makes it difficult to determine whether a violent extremist individual was acting on behalf of the group or in their personal capacity.



Police subdue a clash between supporters of FC Partizan and FC Red Star in Belgrade. Football hooliganism has been associated with organized crime in the Balkans.  
© Pedja Milosavljevic/AFP via Getty Images

Operational collaboration often involves joint violent or criminal activities, and can range from low-end, short-term alliances focused on specific objectives, to high-end, long-term partnerships that integrate organizational functions. The latter often includes sharing human resources and military expertise, as observed with Serbia's violent extremist groups. For example, the nexus between hooligan groups such as United Force and Blood and Honour, a neo-Nazi network, reveals a reliance on organized crime activities such as drug trafficking, extortion and incitement of hatred.

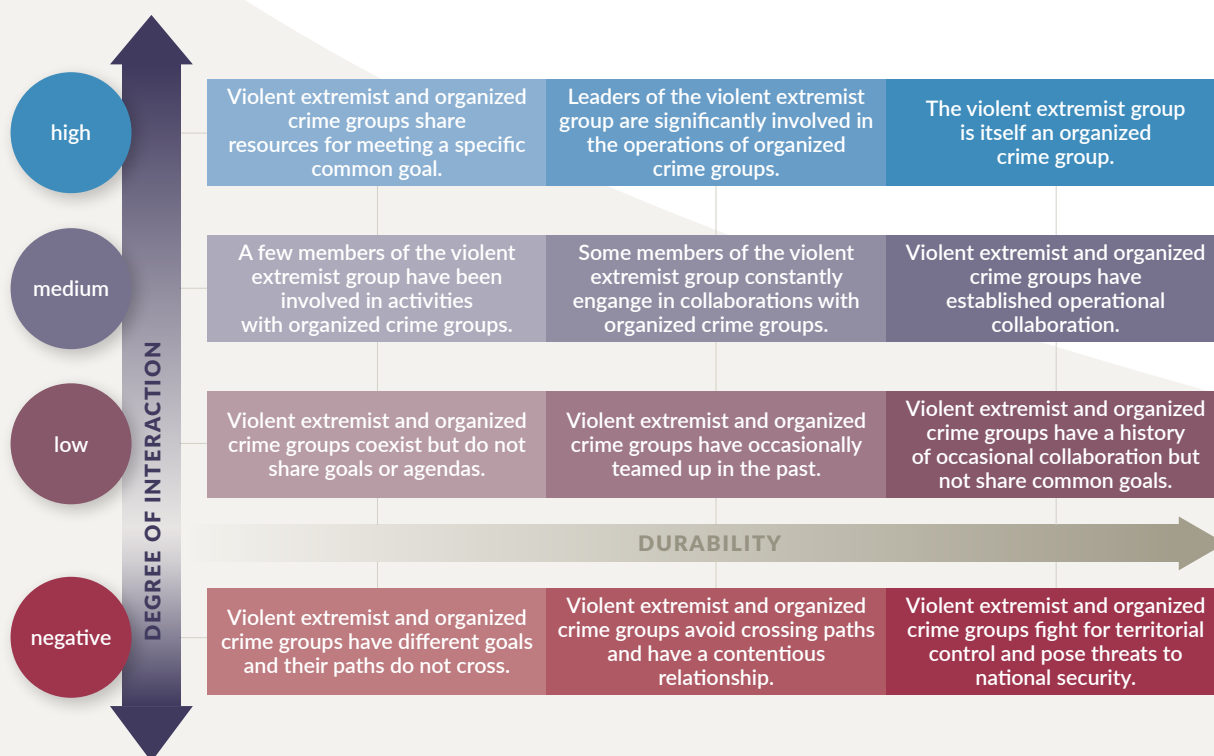
Transactional or logistical partnerships are also observed, where resources or services are exchanged without ideological alignment. For example, alleged members of the Islamic State in North Macedonia have relied on criminal networks for organized robberies, while extremist groups in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina have used NGOs to facilitate terrorism financing.

Contentious relationships also prevail in certain contexts, particularly when violent extremists and criminal actors compete for resources or when extremism threatens criminal profits. In Serbia, violent extremist groups frequently engage in criminal activities such as street drug dealing and racketeering, necessitating high reliance on violence and intimidation. Conversely, in Albania, organized crime groups involved in cocaine trafficking and money laundering often avoid collaborating with extremists, perceiving such alliances as attracting unwanted law enforcement attention.<sup>35</sup>

The case of Zvonko Veselinović and Milan Radoičić in northern Kosovo illustrates the complex interplay between political and criminal agendas. While Veselinović viewed destabilization as essential for ensuring impunity for his trafficking activities, Radoičić's ties with the Serbian government suggest a political motivation to influence the Serb minority in northern Kosovo. The Banjska attack in northern Kosovo in September 2023, in which ethnic Serbian militants killed a police officer, also highlights the challenges of distinguishing between individual motivations and structured group affiliations. Investigations conducted by Kosovan authorities have shown that, despite the absence of group insignia and symbols, the perpetrators' coordination and leadership structures ultimately confirm the existence of a well-structured group.<sup>36</sup>

Extremist groups often rely on transnational networks to extend their influence, as is the case with the Serbian group Srbska čast, which has participated in campaigns across Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Serbia.<sup>37</sup> However, in other cases, their influence is more localized. This can be seen with the United Force hooligans group, known for their association with Blood and Honour, as well as the MC Serbs motorcycle club,<sup>38</sup> whose activities are concentrated in one Belgrade neighbourhood. The group's leader, Dragan Supurović, was accused in 2023 of assaulting a police officer and inciting hatred and intolerance, but is still awaiting trial.<sup>39</sup>

The diverse dynamics observed in the Western Balkans indicate that the interaction between violent extremist and organized crime actors is highly variable, influenced by strategic goals, operational needs and local contexts.<sup>40</sup> As shown in the figure below, while some collaborations reflect deep integration, others are purely transactional or contentious, shaped by the specific illicit markets and political landscapes in which these actors operate.



**FIGURE 1** Matrix of the relationships between violent extremists and organized crime groups in the Western Balkans.



## VIOLENT FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM AND ORGANIZED CRIME

**S**erbia has the highest number of active violent far-right groups in the Balkans (some of which are linked to the extensive local hooligan underworld), followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania. In the case of ethnic Albanians, however, it is essential to consider the group beyond national borders. Particularly in the context of hooliganism, ultranationalist sentiments advocating for a 'Greater Albania' – an area encompassing Albania, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, and including all territories with an ethnic Albanian majority – are a central theme of chants and a catalyst for clashes. The far-right ideology of the Tirana Fanatics, hooligans supporting the Albanian football club FC Tirana, is reinforced by the Shvercerat hooligans, whose members support FC Shkupi from North Macedonia. This Skopje-based group is notorious for drug trafficking and arms smuggling to finance other activities.<sup>41</sup>

### Albanian ultranationalism

**W**hile this report associates nationalism with far-right ideologies, contrasting ethnic Albanian violent far-right ideologies with the concept of ultranationalism provides a clearer understanding of why, for instance, nationalism appeared to be a non-issue for most of the Albanian-speaking experts interviewed.

Ultranationalism, understood as an extreme form of nationalism, often intersects with criminal activities, including illicit trade and partnerships with organized crime, pursued for political purposes. For example, the Albanian National Army, a paramilitary organization advocating for the unification of all ethnic Albanians, has engaged in organized crime to fund and advance its political agenda.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, extremist Kosovo Serbs, such as Milan Radoičić, Zvonko Veselinović and their associates, along with the paramilitary group involved in the Banjska attack in Kosovo (more on this later), exhibit nationalistic motivations. However, categorizing them purely as a far-right group oversimplifies their actions, as these extend beyond the conventional understanding of far-right extremism in Europe. ■

Regarding the size and gender composition of these groups, despite a lack of official data, most are estimated to consist of an average of 6–20 young male adults.<sup>43</sup> Research indicates that the membership status of many individuals fluctuates over short periods, with multiple affiliations often overlapping. Many violent extremists are officially linked to several groups and subgroups. For instance, members of the far-right group Narodni sindikat from Bosnia and Herzegovina are also affiliated with Srbska čast. Moreover, groups often change their names while retaining the same member base, as seen in the case of the Janjičari group, which rebranded itself as Principi. Additionally, there are national branches of transnational organizations, such as Blood and Honour, that were active in Bosnia and Herzegovina and whose members eventually merged into other groups. Local affiliations with international motorcycle gangs, like the Hells Angels from the US and the Night Wolves from Russia, have also been present in ethnic-Serbian areas.<sup>44</sup>

## **Main features of far-right extremist groups**

Of the far-right groups identified, 43% were found to have high or very high levels of violence, with half of these groups originating from Kosovo and Serbia. Regarding access to weapons, 62% of the groups were found to have high or very high access to guns, automatic rifles and, in some instances, explosives. While the research could not definitively trace the origins of the weapons possessed by these groups, several factors may clarify the high availability of arms. Chief among these is the historical context of the Yugoslav wars and the overall political instability in the region during the 1990s. The widespread circulation of arms used during the conflicts resulted in a substantial number of unaccounted-for weapons after the war, while the concurrent rise in arms trafficking on the black market further facilitated access to weapons, particularly for criminal organizations.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, newly manufactured weapons are also present in the region. Following the Banjska attack, for instance, analyses of the ammunition and rifles used showed that many had been manufactured in Serbia between 2021 and 2022.<sup>46</sup>

Another key feature is the close collaboration, often through corrupt practices, between criminal networks and law enforcement agencies, some of whose representatives are directly involved in criminal activities. Notably, this is the case with violent far-right actors identified in Montenegro, whose stringent territorial control may stem from criminal activities conducted with the assistance of law enforcement agencies. Local media outlets have referred to this criminal consortium as the 'police cartel'.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, regarding criminal market activities, 57% of the analyzed violent extremist groups demonstrate a high or very high level of interaction with organized crime groups, particularly with mafia-style organizations, criminal networks and state-embedded actors involved in drug trafficking, arms smuggling (primarily in Kosovo), extortion and protection racketeering. The highest incidence of interaction with both mafia-style groups and state-embedded actors is seen among Serbian and Kosovar violent extremist factions. This often results from the overlap between state institutions and local criminals, a situation facilitated by party structures in a manner consistent with state capture.



## Far right extremism in state-captured contexts

While some extremist groups engage in criminal activities to generate profit and fund their operations, others consist of individuals who are particularly active in organized crime, often leveraging the infrastructure of the far-right groups to which they belong. However, the relationship between these groups and organized crime is often shaped by the political agendas of state representatives and the level of complicity between the groups and party structures. This dynamic is especially pronounced in contexts of state capture. As state institutions are seized and occupied by colluding party cadres, they increasingly become infiltrated by criminal organizations.

In a classic state-capture scenario, the ruling party exerts control over state institutions, including the judiciary, public enterprises and national broadcasters, to further its political agenda and influence public opinion in alignment with its interests.<sup>48</sup> In this arrangement, the party acts as a mechanism that guarantees the ruling elite's dominance over public life through these institutions. However, if the ruling party colludes with organized crime, the latter can infiltrate public life, obscuring the distinction between state institutions and criminal activities.

In authoritarian states, where a regime change is less likely and party cadres retain their positions in public institutions, the control over these institutions is more pronounced. If this relationship is disrupted – perhaps following a democratic election that results in a political shift – it could trigger an institutional and social upheaval. In the Western Balkans, Serbia exemplifies a captured state. Here, political party structures dominate all aspects of social life, and are reinforced by the influence of organized crime. One of the most significant episodes in this context was the 2016 demolition in Savamala, a downtown residential area of Belgrade, which shows how criminal organizations are used as state proxies.

## The Savamala demolition

Between 24 and 26 April 2016, a group of masked men bulldozed several buildings on Hercegovačka Street in Belgrade's Savamala district during the night. The area had been selected as the site of a UAE-sponsored 'waterfront' project, designated as a project of national interest, but it was a densely inhabited residential area and therefore bureaucratically difficult to clear out.<sup>49</sup> Despite several calls for assistance from residents, the police never intervened in the demolition.<sup>50</sup> A few days afterwards, Aleksandar Vučić, prime minister at the time, said that the highest city authorities would be held accountable for the demolition; yet no one was ever investigated or prosecuted. Vučić also remarked that those responsible for the destruction of the Savamala buildings were 'complete idiots' for not carrying out the act 'in the sunlight', suggesting that the buildings were illegal and implying that the demolition was not a significant issue, as it had even received tacit approval from state authorities.<sup>51</sup> Five years later, the criminal figure Veljko Belivuk, also a member of the Serbian ruling party at that time, admitted his involvement in the demolition alongside his associates to speed up the demolition process, which the government could not have carried out lawfully.<sup>52</sup> Vučić dismissed these claims, rubbishing them as lies.<sup>53</sup> The Savamala incident suggests that in Serbia, the state apparatus may rely on unorthodox enforcement methods, including outsourcing work to criminal groups.<sup>54</sup> ■



Police officers at the site of a mural in Belgrade glorifying convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić. The Serbian general is considered a hero by some far-right extremists. © Oliver Bunic/AFP via Getty Images

A similar situation of state capture played out in Montenegro during President Djukanović's tenure, when police forces became so deeply infiltrated by criminal organizations that local media referred to it as the 'police cartel'. Many of this extensive network, primarily composed of police officers, have been arrested and prosecuted for facilitating the drug trade in Montenegro.<sup>55</sup> Following the country's parliamentary elections in 2020, which marked the end of the 30-year dominance of Djukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), members of the 'police cartel' collaborated with drug lord Darko Šarić to deface walls in the town of Pljevlja with ethno-nationalist graffiti. This area was the site of war crimes against the Muslim population during the 1990s.<sup>56</sup> The graffiti specifically glorified convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić and was intended to intimidate the Muslim community. These activities were uncovered through decrypted SKY ECC communications, which prompted the prosecutor's office to initiate an investigation.<sup>57</sup> The aim had been to instil fear that the DPS's departure from power would lead to the resurgence of ethnic conflict. This case illustrates how influential politicians can maintain control over law enforcement agencies even after their party is no longer in power, as well as how criminal organizations can influence social and political dynamics in particular countries.

Two more detailed case studies provide an in-depth look at how the intersection between violent extremism and organized crime can undermine governance and promote destabilization in the region. The first case explores the Janjičari, a hooligan group linked to FC Partizan, whose criminal activities and allegiance to Serbia's ruling party illustrate the symbiotic relationship between political power and organized crime. The second highlights the Banjska group, focusing on the terrorist attack by ethnic Serbs in Kosovo and its implications for already tense Kosovo-Serbia relations.

## Case study: football hooligans serving the ruling party

The Janjičari, which began as a violent hooligan group supporting Belgrade's FC Partizan, gradually transformed from a typical violent far-right organization into a sophisticated organized crime syndicate under the leadership of Veljko Belivuk. The group later rebranded itself as Principi (Principles), maintaining the same membership and composition.

Nationalist banners and chants praising war criminals are a common occurrence at Partizan matches, and members of the Janjičari/Principi have participated in nationalist rallies and attacked democratic demonstrations, as evidenced by their disruptive presence at EuroPride 2022 in Belgrade – an event that went ahead despite an earlier ban by President Vučić, but was marred by violent unrest.<sup>58</sup>

As described below, investigations have revealed that, beyond their football hooliganism, the group operates with a high level of organization, employing encrypted communication and carefully managing criminal activities such as drug trafficking, kidnapping and murder. According to an indictment analyzed by the investigative media outlet KRIK, their evolution into an organized crime group was underscored by their use of FC Partizan facilities to store weapons and drugs, and their ability to protect their illicit operations with multiple layers of security.<sup>59</sup> Through the mobilization of 'muscle' and the application of extreme violence, the Janjičari also forged close connections with state officials and the notorious Kavač clan, a Montenegrin organized crime group originating from Montenegro that is involved in cocaine trafficking from Latin America to Europe.<sup>60</sup>

## Belgrade's hooligan underworld

To gain a deeper understanding of the underworld of Belgrade hooligans, it is important to note that while FC Red Star supporters are united as a monolithic bloc under the banner of Delije and occupy the north stand of the Rajko Mitić stadium, FC Partizan fans, known as the Grobari, are more divided, largely due to political affiliations and connections to organized crime.<sup>61</sup> The main division within this group comes from their ties to politicians who have tried to exert control over them. As a result, the faction known as the 'Forbidden' is made up of hooligans who reject any political association and instead focus solely on supporting FC Partizan. Divisions among FC Partizan supporters have resulted in numerous violent incidents, with this internal conflict proving to be even more intense than the rivalry between the Delije and the Grobari, who are historical adversaries. In December 2017, during the Belgrade derby, violence stemming from internal divisions within the Grobari group became public, culminating in a mass brawl in the southern stands as factions vied for supremacy.<sup>62</sup> In another incident in July 2021, fans from the southern stands attacked those in the eastern stands after the latter chanted slurs against the Serbian president.<sup>63</sup> Conflicts arise within the stadium as groups compete for control over specific sections. This authority brings with it various personal benefits, including opportunities for paid international travel for away games, influence over businesses, and the provision of security for nightclubs and the lucrative drug trade.<sup>64</sup> Control over stadium sections also translates into dominance on the streets. ■

Veljko Belivuk, leader of a violent hooligan group supporting FC Partizan, is led away after his arrest during a raid on a Belgrade stadium in 2021. © Pedja Milosavljevic/ AFP via Getty Images



## Hooliganism beyond the stands

The Janjičari group was reportedly established by Nikola Đedović following a confrontation with the 'Forbidden' faction to gain complete control of the stands.<sup>65</sup> The group's cadres were then reinforced by hooligans recruited from various groups supporting different football clubs, including FC Rad, FC Red Star and FC Žemun. Hence the name Janjičari, a reference to the diverse elite unit of the Ottoman army known as the Janissaries.<sup>66</sup> One of the group's first leaders was Aleksandar Stanković, who took control of the stands after the dominant Alkatraz faction was dismantled in 2013.<sup>67</sup> In the same year, Stanković was sentenced to five years and 10 months in prison for the illegal possession of firearms and for leading a drug trafficking organization.<sup>68</sup> However, he never served a day in prison, as the court granted his requests to postpone the execution of his sentence 12 times, citing alleged health reasons.<sup>69</sup> The wider public became aware of Stanković in 2016, after an assault on the security guards of FC Partizan director Miloš Vazura in the parking lot outside the stadium. Security camera footage captured Belivuk, Stanković's right-hand man, brutally beating Vazura's bodyguard.<sup>70</sup>

A close friend of Stanković was Nenad Vučković, a high-ranking member of the Serbian police. Vučković, who was also a supporter of FC Partizan, reportedly served as an important link for Stanković within law enforcement. He monitored the group's activities, issued orders and provided guidance on potential opportunities for collaboration with other criminal networks.. He also protected the group, particularly after Stanković's murder, by destroying all evidence that could implicate them in criminal activities.<sup>71</sup> Vučković's criminal connections were further highlighted by the Serbian Army Union, which filed a criminal complaint against two generals in 2017 for allegedly permitting Vučković, Stanković, and Belivuk to use a military shooting range in Pančevo for target practice.<sup>72</sup> However, the criminal complaint was dismissed because evidence of these visits vanished – security camera footage was overwritten and pages from the visit logbook torn out. The complaint noted that Vučković arrived at the barracks accompanied by Stanković, Belivuk and the then-Secretary General of the Government of Serbia.<sup>73</sup>

Stanković was murdered in 2016, an incident that created an almost extraordinary situation, prompting the police minister at the time to convene a press conference in Belgrade the following morning, where he declared 'a war on the mafia'.<sup>74</sup> However, no one was arrested for Stanković's murder, nor was the case officially resolved.<sup>75</sup> A report by the Serbian Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), documented by KRIK, expressed suspicion that Jovan Vukotić, the leader of the Škaljari clan from Montenegro, had ordered the assassination.<sup>76</sup>

## The Montenegrin feud and its implications for Serbia

Originating from Kotor in Montenegro, the Škaljari clan emerged as a prominent drug trafficking organization after an international police operation in 2009 dismantled one of the largest Serbian-speaking drug trafficking organizations, led by the infamous Darko Šarić. Shortly after this police operation, one of Šarić's closest associates, Dragan Dudić, who managed the group's operations in Montenegro, was assassinated in Kotor in 2010. The killer, Ivan Vračar, is identified in a BIA report as a member of the Škaljari clan, as revealed by KRIK.<sup>77</sup> According to the same report, after Dudić's assassination, the Škaljari clan was led by Jovan Vukotić, who took control of a significant portion of Dudić's cocaine trafficking activities from Latin America to Europe.<sup>78</sup>

After the fall of Šarić's group, the Škaljari clan ascended to power in the Balkan criminal underworld. However, internal conflicts over financial resources and drug distribution soon emerged. A major rift occurred in 2014 due to a dispute in Valencia, Spain, which led to a war between the Škaljari clan and the Kavač clan, another Kotor-based group that had been an ally until that point.<sup>79</sup> As anticipated, the war between the two Montenegrin clans eventually spilled over into Serbia, where the Montenegrin mafia has historically influenced the dynamics of the criminal landscape and where both clans sought to form alliances. The Škaljari clan aligned itself with Filip Korać, who has been described by the BIA as 'the head of one of the most dangerous criminal groups operating internationally', while the Kavač clan found an ally in the Janjičari.<sup>80</sup>

### A maelstrom of murders

When the mafia war erupted between the Montenegrin Škaljari and Kavač clans in 2014, the Janjičari sided with the Kavač faction.<sup>81</sup> Stanković's closest associate, Veljko Belivuk, assumed leadership of the Janjičari following Stanković's murder. It was after Stanković's murder that the Janjičari became the Principi.

Having been a member of the neo-Nazi group United Force,<sup>82</sup> Belivuk was already known for his violent behaviour. In one incident at a Belgrade nightclub in 2007, he had attacked two young men, for which he was sentenced to five and a half months in prison.<sup>83</sup> According to an investigation by KRIK, Belivuk was also involved in the demolition of a café in Belgrade owned by Aleksandar Vavić, the leader of the rival group Alcatraz, in December 2013. However, the prosecution dropped the criminal charges after he donated 100 000 Serbian dinars (approximately €880) to charity.<sup>84</sup>

Belivuk and the hooligans from his group were implicated in the murder of Alan Kožar, one of the leaders of the Škaljari clan, along with his associate, in Corfu, Greece, in 2020.<sup>85</sup> Belivuk, identified by Serbian police as a member of the Kavač clan, was arrested in February 2021 along with 16 others. The group was involved in kidnappings, murders, drug trafficking and money laundering, according to the indictment.<sup>86</sup> Investigators claimed that Belivuk's team used the facilities of the FC Partizan stadium in Belgrade to conceal weapons and drugs.<sup>87</sup> As reported by KRIK, according to the indictment brought against Belivuk and 31 others, they targeted criminal rivals, primarily members of the rival Škaljari clan. The indictment alleges that the group was responsible for five murders as well as torture. Marko Miljković, Belivuk's right-hand man, allegedly devised scams to lure victims to locations where group members would subsequently kidnap and kill them.<sup>88</sup>

The murders attributed to Belivuk's group total nearly a dozen and include some 'excellent cadavers' such as Filip Korać, an influential mobster with ties to the notorious Zemun clan dating back to the early 1990s.<sup>89</sup> As revealed by the decryption of SKY communications, Korać and the Škaljari clan were directly involved in the war against Belivuk and the Kavač clan.<sup>90</sup> Another victim was Milan Ljepoja, who allegedly organized a team sent to Ukraine to kill Belivuk's boss and Kavač clan leader Radoje Zvicer.<sup>91</sup>

One part that the prosecution reconstructed less thoroughly was how the group engaged in drug trafficking. Witnesses told the prosecution that the group used the facilities at the Partizan stadium to sell drugs, including cannabis, cocaine, amphetamines and MDMA. Aleksa Šejčić, one of the accused, described the drug business to investigators, explaining that he had gained the group's trust by excelling at painting graffiti for Red Star fans. As a result, the group allowed him to work and sleep at the Partizan stadium restaurant. There, he claims to have repackaged various types of drugs received in 100-gram packages into smaller doses. The group was also accused of possessing a significant number of firearms. During searches conducted in 2021, police discovered 100 weapons, mainly pistols and rifles, as well as a submachine gun and explosives.<sup>92</sup>

## **From hooliganism to organized crime**

The intricate connections between Belivuk's group and the state reveal a crucial aspect of far-right extremism in the region. Belivuk's rise to power and subsequent control of the Partizan stands were facilitated by his relationships with corrupt state officials and law enforcement. This blurred the lines between criminality and politics, with Belivuk's group actively engaging in political intimidation and state-sanctioned violence, while simultaneously overseeing a network of illegal activities, including murder, drug trafficking and extortion.

Yet, as the case study shows, far-right extremism in the Balkans cannot be understood solely through the lens of ideology. The group's involvement in organized crime – particularly drug trafficking – demonstrates how criminal and political agendas can converge and reinforce each other. The use of encrypted communications, the coordination of murders and the alleged concealment of weapons and drugs within FC Partizan's facilities are examples of the sophistication and reach of these groups. The Janjičari case reinforces the notion that far-right extremism in the Western Balkans is multifaceted. While it is driven by nationalist ideologies, it is equally shaped by organized crime and political corruption. A nuanced understanding of these groups therefore requires considering their criminal activities and political affiliations alongside their ideological motivations.

## **Case study: the Banjska group**

On 24 September 2023, a Kosovo police patrol car encountered trucks blocking a road near Banjska, a village in Kosovo. The patrol was attacked by a group of heavily armed Serb militants, killing one police officer with an explosive device and injuring several others.<sup>93</sup> When reinforcements arrived, they discovered around 30 heavily armed ethnic-Serb fighters, likely from northern Kosovo and Serbia, who had broken into a medieval monastery near the village. During the ensuing firefight, three Serb fighters were killed. A tense standoff followed between the militants and the Kosovo special police, but the group eventually retreated into the surrounding woods, abandoning their weapons.<sup>94</sup> According to the indictment, the alleged goal of the terrorist action was the annexation of northern Kosovo to Serbia.<sup>95</sup>

The violence in Banjska has heightened tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, with each side blaming the other for the escalation. The scale of the armed clash resembled wartime conditions, with the attackers employing sophisticated weapons and military tactics,<sup>96</sup> and strained relations between the ethnic Serb minority in northern Kosovo and the ethnic Albanian majority in government.<sup>97</sup>

## Legal and political consequences

Regarded by the European Parliament as an act of terrorism,<sup>98</sup> the Banjska attack is the most serious and violent incident to have occurred in the Western Balkans in the past two decades.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, the quantity of sophisticated and brand new weapons seized by the Kosovo police in the aftermath of the attack suggests that it may have set the stage for a wider confrontation in northern Kosovo, potentially leading to a new conflict between Kosovo and Serbia.<sup>100</sup> In fact, this event has significantly worsened the already fragile relationship between the two countries and has impeded further diplomatic negotiations, which have long been promoted and mediated by the EU, with the support of the US and other Western countries.

According to the Kosovo prosecution, the attack was carried out by at least 30 armed men, with military or paramilitary training, using weapons from Serbian manufacturers. This fact is enough for Kosovo officials to suspect Serbia's collusion and at least indirect support for the attack.<sup>101</sup> However, Belgrade officials have consistently denied the allegations and observed a national day of mourning for the 'tragic events' in Banjska. In an attempt to downplay the gravity of the attack, President Vučić refrained from calling the attackers 'terrorists', instead describing them as 'family men'.<sup>102</sup>

A few days later, Milan Radoičić, a local Kosovo-Serb politician and influential businessman, publicly admitted responsibility for the events in Banjska, claiming that he had acted without the support of the Serbian authorities.<sup>103</sup> As a result, he had his assets confiscated in Kosovo and was apprehended in Serbia, where he spent a day in pre-trial detention.<sup>104</sup> He was subsequently released on the condition that he did not leave Serbia or enter Kosovo.<sup>105</sup> However, his connections with local and Serbian politicians cast considerable doubt on his claim to have acted independently, and raised suspicions of collusion with Serbian institutions, including rogue factions of the army or the Security Intelligence Agency. According to Kosovo's interior minister, one of the attackers killed, Bojan Mijailović, was the former bodyguard of the then-intelligence chief Aleksandar Vulin, who later became deputy prime minister.<sup>106</sup>

Following Radoičić's public confession, Serbian police arrested him on charges of conspiracy to commit criminal acts, and unauthorized production, possession and trafficking of firearms and explosive substances. After the attack, Serbian prosecutors opened an investigation into Radoičić for allegedly procuring arms from Bosnia and Herzegovina for use in North Kosovo, as well as for serious crimes against public security.<sup>107</sup> He was not charged with murder or terrorist acts, which carry longer sentences.<sup>108</sup>

Meanwhile, the Kosovo government has presented evidence suggesting a link between the Banjska group and the Serbian government, raising concerns about the potential for escalation. An interview with the former director-general of Kosovo police revealed a widespread belief in Kosovo that the main challenge in properly prosecuting figures such as Radoičić is the protection they get from the Serbian government.<sup>109</sup>

As for the rest of the group, three men remain in custody in Kosovo on charges of plotting acts of terrorism, while the others are at large. According to international media reports, around 30 men participated in the attack, but several more may have been involved either directly or indirectly by providing logistical support.<sup>110</sup> Estimates of the total number of people involved in the attack vary: Radio Free Europe estimates that some 80 attackers managed to flee Kosovo in the aftermath,<sup>111</sup> while the Kosovo government reported in April 2024 that the number of individuals involved reached 200, as noted by the International Crisis Group.<sup>112</sup> Our research indicates that 15 of these individuals, all of whom are on the run, played an active role in the Banjska attack, and some were reportedly involved in clashes with soldiers belonging to KFOR, the NATO-led peacekeeping force, in May 2023.<sup>113</sup> According to the Kosovo police, Interpol has issued Red Notices for Radoičić and 18 others.<sup>114</sup>

In September 2024, Kosovo's Special Prosecution filed an indictment against 45 people involved in the attack, charging them with terrorism, terrorism financing and money laundering. According to the prosecution, the group was highly organized and characterized by a clear leadership structure headed by Radoičić.<sup>115</sup> While those arrested in Kosovo are set to face prosecution for serious crimes, progress on the Serbian side has been slow.

In accordance with the Kosovo Prosecutor's decision of September 2024, our research has consistently indicated that all the accused should be treated collectively as part of a structured group known as the Banjska group. Despite the lack of formal membership and the absence of official symbols and a designated name, the group operated under clear leadership. Furthermore, although the group has no prior record of violent extremism, some members were allegedly involved in previous confrontations, including with members of two groups designated as terrorist organizations by the Kosovo government: Civil Defence (Civilna Zastita) and the Northern Brigade (Severna Brigada).<sup>116</sup>

Unlike most far-right groups in the region, which are driven by ethnic or nationalist beliefs, the violence perpetrated by the Banjska group appears to have been motivated by a specific political agenda in the context of bilateral relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Their aim seems to have been to undermine the 'normalization process' that has long been publicly supported by the Serbian government, particularly in light of its commitment to EU accession.<sup>117</sup> This objective can be better understood through the figure of Milan Radoičić, the main Kosovo-Serb kingpin who, according to international commentators, has long enjoyed the support of Serbian officials.<sup>118</sup> Until the Banjska attack, Radoičić was the deputy president of the Serbian List, the main Kosovo-Serb party that participated in Kosovo's elections and in the government during Prime Minister Kurti's first mandate. As the Serbian List is the only party representing Serbs in Kosovo, President Vučić has an influential say in its internal dynamics.<sup>119</sup> Radoičić has participated in several official events in Serbia and has been in hiding there since becoming one of the primary suspects in the 2018 assassination of opposition politician Oliver Ivanović.<sup>120</sup>

Radoičić and Vučić have attended several public events together, and the Serbian president has often publicly praised him as a patriot.<sup>121</sup> President Vučić has also defended Radoičić against accusations from Pristina but said that he would be questioned about the violence.<sup>122</sup>





An attack by Serb militants on the Kosovan village of Banjska in 2023 has fuelled tensions between Serbia and Kosovo. © AFP via Getty Images

## The nexus with organized crime

Before his death, Ivanović gave an interview in which he identified Radoičić as the main threat to Kosovo Serbs living in northern Kosovo. Radoičić is a key figure linking violent extremism, organized crime and politics in the region. According to a report by the BIA, Radoičić was involved in transporting drugs purchased from a Kosovo-Albanian trafficker and then smuggling them into Serbia.<sup>123</sup> In 2021, the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control issued an executive order sanctioning Radoičić and several of his associates, including his best man, Zvonko Veselinović, for misappropriation of state assets, corruption related to government contracts and bribery, among other charges.<sup>124</sup> A year later, both associates were designated by the UK under the Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions Regulations 2021, which allowed for the freezing of their assets for their involvement in serious corruption.<sup>125</sup>

Zvonko Veselinović, a controversial businessman from North Mitrovica, is widely regarded as a prominent figure in the criminal underworld of northern Kosovo. He came to public attention in 2011 for organizing the barricades at the border between Kosovo and Serbia when KFOR took control of the border crossings.<sup>126</sup> Before this incident, Veselinović was recognized as one of the 'bridge keepers', the informal citizen patrols that monitored the crossings over the Ibar River, which separates the predominantly Serb North Mitrovica from the ethnically Albanian southern municipality. For this reason, Veselinović has long been regarded as a patriot among ethnic Serbs – a title that he has used to deflect accusations of involvement in trafficking drug, weapons and fuel.<sup>127</sup> He has been arrested several times on various charges, including in Serbia in 2003 for transporting 3 kilograms of cocaine. In 2011, Veselinović and Radoičić, were indicted for the theft of 32 trucks, but both were acquitted in 2016.<sup>128</sup>

In addition, according to a report by the BIA, Veselinović was allegedly in contact with Serbian military officials and former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army, with whom he reportedly trafficked goods, money, drugs and weapons between Serbia and Kosovo.<sup>129</sup> He is also alleged to have smuggled

fuel from Serbia and sold it to ethnic Albanians in Kosovo's southern municipalities. This fuel trade was facilitated by a 2005 Serbian decree that exempted the payment of VAT on goods destined for Serbian communities in Kosovo. This provision, which was in force until 2012, primarily benefited Veselinović rather than the enclaves where Serbs resided.<sup>130</sup>

It is important to note that one of Veselinović's main partners was Mentor Beqiri, an ethnic Albanian from Kosovo. Their fuel business reportedly allowed them 'to establish an empire in Kosovo'.<sup>131</sup> The collaboration with ethnic Albanians and Kosovar security officials is both illegal and paradoxical, given that Veselinović has consistently been viewed as a 'defender' of Serbian national interests in what Belgrade still claims is its southern autonomous province. Like Radoičić, Veselinović has also been publicly lauded by President Vučić.<sup>132</sup>

As reported by KRIK, Veselinović appears in two separate photographs alongside Andrej Vučić, the brother of the Serbian president and a senior member of the central executive board of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party.<sup>133</sup> There are several photographs showing Veselinović and Radoičić in private meetings with representatives of the Serbian government or individuals closely associated with it. The two were also photographed together with Nikola Petrović, Vučić's best man,<sup>134</sup> and both attended the anniversary celebrations of the *Informer* tabloid, which is known for its pro-government bias.<sup>135</sup> Additionally, Milan Radoičić was present at the National Assembly during the Serbian President's inaugural address in 2022, following the imposition of sanctions against him.<sup>136</sup> More recently, Radoičić was photographed having dinner with Milan Djurić, then Serbia's ambassador to the US and now Serbia's foreign minister.<sup>137</sup>

## Beyond the attack

Most of the members of the Banjska group are still at large, and the motives behind the its formation are likely to prevail in the region for a number of reasons. Not only does the political obstruction of the integration of the four northern Serb-majority municipalities into Kosovo's institutions continue, but the same nationalist goals that motivated the Banjska group remain popular among Kosovo Serbs. Both of these elements are directly controlled by Belgrade, which has the most to gain from such escalations. In fact, the Serbian government has a greater interest in maintaining the status quo on Kosovo than in recognizing Kosovo's independence. In the evolving diplomatic landscape, the attack in Banjska had precisely this effect: it halted the EU-led normalization process. Ultimately, while the Banjska group may no longer exist and its members could still end up in prison, the rationale behind its creation, the paramilitary training exhibited by its members and the alleged collusion with Serbian institutions suggest that a similar group is likely to be formed again in the future with the support of Belgrade.

At the same time, organized crime and the enduring presence of widespread illicit trade will continue to link violent extremism with local politics in northern Kosovo. The same members of criminal groups who have represented the Serbian minority in national institutions for years are also implicated in the Banjska attack. This suggests that the group is, or was, the ultimate manifestation of the connection between organized crime and violent extremism, rather than merely serving as a figurative bridge between two distinct entities.



## VIOLENT RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND ORGANIZED CRIME

**D**uring data collection, recent cases connecting violent religious extremism and organized crime in the region were difficult to document. This may be due to the more discreet nature of their activities, which often occur in religious sites or online. Similarly, violent religious extremists appear to operate in a more subtle way than the groups active in the violent far right, which are more openly influenced by the legacy of the wars of the 1990s and the subsequent political tensions. The absence of strong ties between extremist religious groups and influential figures within institutions and political parties also contributes to the insufficient attention and media coverage given to the criminal activities of these groups. Unlike with most far-right organizations, this research has not been able to identify stable or significant links between violent religious extremists and ruling parties or state institutions.

Nonetheless, this research has identified several violent religious extremist groups and individuals active in criminal markets. The phenomenon has been identified primarily in Muslim-majority communities, is present to varying degrees in all Western Balkan countries and has posed a threat at different times.

Within the Balkans, Kosovo has been particularly affected by religiously motivated violent extremism. Violent religious extremism peaked in the country between 2014 and 2016, coinciding with the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. During this period, some 400 Kosovars left the country to join the Islamic State, while many other radicalized individuals remained.<sup>138</sup> The Kosovo government, with the support of the international community, took steps to address the security threat posed in 2016 by extremists.<sup>139</sup> These measures included disrupting planned attacks, such as the attempted poisoning in 2016 of the Badovc Lake,<sup>140</sup> Pristina's primary water source, and the foiled attack on the Israeli national football team in Shkodër, Albania, in 2017.<sup>141</sup> In addition, numerous NGOs suspected of funding terrorism were closed down in 2014 and 2015.<sup>142</sup>

## Religion as a pull factor for recruitment

Most criminal activities carried out by violent religious extremists are linked to terrorism. The relationships between groups and individuals involved in terrorism-related activities and criminal organizations should be understood as the result of interactions between distinct entities, resembling an occasional marriage of convenience. In any case, because terrorism and its financing are often associated with criminal markets, the distinction between violent religious extremists and criminal actors is often blurred within the same organization.

The most active violent religious extremist groups in the Western Balkans are connected to either Islamic State or al-Qaeda terrorist organizations. By the end of 2017, more than a thousand people from the region were reported to have travelled to Syria and Iraq.<sup>143</sup> These connections are often facilitated by local religious leaders and imams operating outside of official Islamic institutions and in informal, unrecognized mosques. Within Europe, Kosovo had the highest per capita rate of people joining the Islamic State and its affiliates in Syria and Iraq. The rise of informal religious gatherings led by unrecognized imams, often referred to as 'para-jamaats', has emerged as a significant factor in the radicalization process.<sup>144</sup> These groups exist outside the jurisdiction of the official Islamic Community of Kosovo and are characterized by the promotion of a more radical interpretation of Islam, including ideologies such as Wahhabism and Salafism. In August 2023, Kosovar media reported on two mosques operating independently, outside the jurisdiction of the official Islamic community. The distinguishing feature of these para-jamaats is their outright rejection of the jurisdiction of the established Islamic authority in Kosovo.<sup>145</sup>

In some cases, connections are maintained by returning foreign terrorist fighters who establish NGOs to fund extremists in the wider region. In Montenegro, a number of NGOs have been monitored by the Agency for National Security's Directorate for Organized Crime and Counter-Terrorism due to suspicious donations from Austria and countries in the Middle East. By following the money flows and activities of these NGOs, the agency has learned that most of their funding comes from organizations linked to the Islamic State and is predominantly used to promote radical Islam.<sup>146</sup>

In other instances, criminal activities differ from the 'typical' terrorism financing. In July 2023, connections between the Macedonian criminal underworld and local members or sympathizers of the Islamic State became apparent with the assassination of Orhan Bajrami, a casino owner and a prominent figure in an organized crime group involved in drug trafficking and extortion. After Bajrami's murder, a former supporter posted content on social media platforms glorifying him 'as a martyr in the path of God'.<sup>147</sup>

The Albanian-populated regions of Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo show the highest levels of activity in quantitative terms. Extremist groups in these areas are involved in a variety of criminal markets, including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, extortion and protection racketeering. Unauthorized imams often play a central role in these operations. Illicit financial flows managed by informal religious leaders may be used to finance the recruitment of foreign fighters or to purchase weapons.<sup>148</sup> New recruits either join combat fronts or disseminate propaganda at the local level to support recruitment efforts.

More recently, the region has also emerged as a destination for foreign fighters. In 2020, Albanian authorities announced the arrest of a 24-year-old Tajik national wanted by Germany for suspected involvement in an Islamic State cell. This arrest followed Germany's detention of five Tajiks suspected of planning attacks on German soil, all linked to the same cell.<sup>149</sup> Its members, including a previously detained leader, were alleged to have planned attacks, acquired weapons and been involved in a failed contract killing in Albania to finance their activities.<sup>150</sup>



An attack on the Israeli embassy in Belgrade by a man linked to the Wahhabi movement in 2024 was classified as an act of terrorism. © Oliver Bunic/ AFP via Getty Images

## An ideal hub for recruitment and logistics

Compared to Western Europe, the Western Balkans do not appear to be a primary target for criminal and terrorist activities. However, recorded data suggests that the region plays a specific role in supporting terrorism elsewhere, serving as a hub for recruitment, financing and logistics. For this reason, the Western Balkans is often perceived as one of the main terrorist hubs in Europe, supplying arms, funding and fighters for conflicts and attacks abroad. For instance, evidence suggests that the weapons used by the Tunisian national responsible for the Nice truck terror attack in 2016 were supplied by Endri Elezi, an Albanian national who was subsequently arrested in Italy and extradited to France.<sup>151</sup>

Also of note is the shooting in Vienna, Austria, in November 2020, in which four civilians were killed and 23 others injured.<sup>152</sup> The gunman, who was born and raised in Austria, was of Macedonian-Albanian descent. For terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State, foreign fighters from the Balkans are a good resource because of their links to large diaspora communities in Western Europe, the Islamic ties within their societies, and the region's history of recent conflicts and unresolved political and ethnic tensions.<sup>153</sup>

However, even though religious extremism in the Balkans has not experienced as many violent episodes and terrorist attacks as in other European regions, this should not lead to an underestimation of the potential threat posed by extremist individuals and groups, for at least two related reasons. First, fatalities are not the only indicators to consider. A low number of attacks and casualties does not necessarily mean that religious extremism is absent or not dangerous. On the contrary, it suggests that extremist groups and individuals may be focusing on other significant activities, including recruiting and financing terrorist operations elsewhere. Secondly, dormant extremism can still awaken and have destructive, unpredictable consequences, as evidenced by the Wahabi who attacked the Israeli embassy in Belgrade in June 2024 (see the box below).<sup>154</sup>

These two factors stem from high levels of indoctrination and radicalization, processes that are crucial in preparing violent extremists to commit acts of violence. These conditions also facilitate the return of foreign fighters, who may subsequently influence their home societies by 'importing' a more radical and violent interpretation of Islam.

## The embassy attacks

In June 2024, a 25-year-old man attacked a gendarme at the Israeli embassy in Belgrade, Serbia, with a crossbow, injuring the officer before being fatally shot.<sup>155</sup> Serbia's interior ministry classified the attack as terrorism. The assailant, Miloš Žujović, had converted to Islam and taken the name Salahudin (meaning 'the righteousness of faith'). Originally from Mladenovac, he had moved to Novi Pazar, a predominantly Muslim city, where authorities were monitoring him as a security threat.<sup>156</sup>

On the day of the incident, Žujović had bypassed the Belgrade synagogue, likely deterred by police presence, and targeted the embassy instead. Although not affiliated with Serbia's main Islamic communities, he was believed to be linked to the Wahhabi movement and attended informal religious gatherings. Police arrested two associates: Igor Despotović, another convert to Islam, and Kemal Begović, whose apartment was found to have clothing bearing Islamic State insignia.<sup>157</sup> No terrorist group has claimed responsibility for the attack, which authorities believe was an isolated incident.

The use of a crossbow highlights security gaps in Serbia's arms regulations. Such attacks are nevertheless rare compared to those perpetrated by Balkan extremists in Western Europe using automatic weapons.<sup>158</sup> The last major religious extremist attack in the region was in 2011, when Mevlid Jašarević, a Wahhabi adherent, fired over a hundred bullets at the US embassy in Sarajevo, injuring a police officer before being subdued.<sup>159</sup>

Both incidents involve radicalized Wahhabi followers operating in informal networks and seeking to destabilize relations with the West. As such, they underscore the need for improved security and better measures to monitor radicalization pathways. ■

The broader context of religious extremism and organized crime in the Western Balkans highlights the complex interplay between radical ideologies, criminal activities and socio-political dynamics. While violent religious extremists often operate discreetly, sometimes leveraging informal religious networks, their connections to organized crime reveal both opportunistic alliances and systemic vulnerabilities. The following case studies highlight instances where violent religious extremism and criminal networks converge, and underline the regional challenges of countering these interlinked threats. These examples also illustrate how such alliances exploit existing socio-economic and institutional weaknesses to sustain their operations and expand their influence.

## Case study: terrorism financing from Italy to Albania

In March 2022, four Albanian men were arrested in Bari, Italy, on charges of illegally funding the activities of Genci Balla, a self-proclaimed imam in Kavajë, Tirana, and sentenced to 17 years of imprisonment for recruiting foreign fighters to join Islamic State forces in Syria.<sup>160</sup> The arrested individuals, Yljan Muca, Elsie Ramku, Roland Leshi and Roland Belba, had long been residents of Italy, with one of them holding Italian citizenship and employed by the Bari municipality. At the time of their arrest, they all claimed ignorance of the final destination of their alleged charitable donations.<sup>161</sup> However, as a result of the operation, which began in 2020, the police discovered multimedia material and documents directly linked to proselytism for the Islamic State. Illicit financial transactions were also carried out through informal and untraceable channels, with cash frequently transported by ferry across the Adriatic Sea.<sup>162</sup> According to the Italian police, the funds raised within the Islamic community of Bari were intended to provide assistance to the Albanian imam, as evidenced by Telegram channels sharing jihadist material, including videos and audio promoting the Islamic State, as well as statements from former Islamic State leaders.<sup>163</sup>

Balla had promoted an Islamist ideology closely associated with terrorist organizations within parajamaats, specifically at two informal mosques: Unaza e Re and Mëzez. These mosques operate independently of the Muslim community of Albania. Balla was arrested in 2014 following a police raid on the mosques, which were linked to the recruitment of over 70 people who went on to join Al-Nusra and later the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. He was charged with advocating terrorist acts, recruitment for terrorism and promoting religious division between Albania's predominantly moderate Muslim population and the Christian community, which has a long tradition of harmony. Despite being sentenced to 17 years in prison, Balla's influence over followers, both inside and outside of prison, remains a concern for authorities.<sup>164</sup>

The Albanian Prosecution Office for Serious Crimes arrested Balla and eight of his associates, establishing the conviction on evidence that 'the defendants, in cooperation with each other, have committed to take active steps to dispatch a considerable number of Albanian citizens to be involved in armed conflicts in the Middle East alongside groups designated as terrorists by the United Nations'.<sup>165</sup> The defendants declined legal representation, claiming that the Quran and the Hadith were the only authorities they recognized.

Balla's activities continued for years from his prison cell. In August 2020, he was placed under a stricter regime for dangerous convicts, known as 41-bis.<sup>166</sup> In response, Balla, along with six other detainees (including Albion Aliko, the subject of the second case study), went on hunger strike.<sup>167</sup> The following month, he was finally transferred to a hospital in serious condition. Despite protests inside and outside the prison, where citizens launched a petition to end the torture against him,<sup>168</sup> the Albanian justice ministry decided in July 2021 to extend the 41-bis regime for Balla and three others. They remained under the 41-bis regime until August 2022.

The 41-bis regime was originally developed by the Italian justice system to isolate convicts and prevent them from communicating with their associates, thereby hindering their ability to manage illegal activities. However, the isolation regime did not prevent Balla from maintaining his connections and managing his international network. The arrest of the four men in Bari shows how, despite the challenges posed by imprisonment, Balla was able to continue to play a leading role in recruitment efforts and the management of illicit financial flows to fund terrorist activities in the Middle East. The extent of the radicalization of the four Albanians in Italy who supported the imam, as well as their true motivations, has yet to be established. Further investigation may eventually reveal how they managed to establish contact with Balla while he was incarcerated.

The fact that Balla was able to continue operating from prison – despite being under a regime so harsh that it has been accused of being a form of torture – raises some serious concerns.<sup>169</sup> First, it is clear that the prison system in which Balla was held had significant security failings, with the possible complicity of prison guards. Secondly, the case illustrates how prisons can paradoxically serve as environments for the further radicalization of extremist individuals, effectively turning cells into spaces beyond the control of authorities.

## Case study: the Lazarat ambush

The convergence of organized crime and religiously motivated violent extremism can also be seen in the case of the brothers Arbion and Alban Aliko from Lazarat in Albania. The Aliko brothers were identified as suspects in the 2015 attack on Albanian police, and their actions revealed the complex interplay between crime and extremism in a region historically known for organized crime and anti-government sentiment.

Lazarat, a village near the Greek border, has long been associated with extensive cannabis cultivation. Since the early 1990s, cannabis farming has provided important seasonal employment for Albanians, especially after the collapse of the communist regime led to widespread unemployment.<sup>170</sup> By 2000, Lazarat was producing an estimated 900 tonnes of cannabis a year, worth around €4.5 billion, and had become central to regional smuggling operations, with routes extending into the EU and Türkiye.<sup>171</sup>

In June 2014, Albanian police conducted a major raid on Lazarat in response to escalating criminal activity.<sup>172</sup> Around 1 000 police officers surrounded the village, where 30 suspected cannabis growers opened fire on them with rocket-propelled grenades, heavy mortars and machine guns. After many growers fled, the authorities destroyed over 130 000 cannabis plants and seized 80 tonnes of cannabis.<sup>173</sup> But tensions between growers and police continued. A year later, Albanian police were once again attacked in Lazarat. During the assault, an elite police officer was killed and two others were injured.<sup>174</sup> The attackers shouted 'Allahu Akbar' ('God is great'), before fleeing along a cannabis smuggling route over a mountain ridge.<sup>175</sup> A search party of some 500 police officers, supported by helicopters, found the Aliko brothers hiding in a communist-era army shelter 18 kilometres north of their home.<sup>176</sup>

During the investigation, prosecutors alleged that the Aliko brothers had been training a dozen young men for over six months to carry out an attack on the police and to resume cannabis production in Lazarat following previous crackdowns. The armed assault on law enforcement was meticulously planned and involved military-grade weapons, sniper rifles and explosives.<sup>177</sup> The Aliko brothers coordinated simultaneous attacks from different positions. During the raid, police seized several tonnes of cannabis and around 500 weapons.<sup>178</sup> The scale of the operation highlights the extensive criminal infrastructure in Lazarat and the challenges faced by law enforcement in dismantling such networks.

The broader implications of this case extend beyond the immediate criminal activity. As noted above, Arbion Aliko later participated in the hunger strike against the 41-bis prison regime in 2020, expressing solidarity with Balla.<sup>179</sup> Evidence from open-source research indicates that both brothers were heavily indoctrinated and radicalized, with their social media profiles revealing an open display of support for the Islamic State.<sup>180</sup>





A shootout in Lazarat, Albania's 'cannabis kingdom', revealed a complex interplay between organized crime and religious violent extremism.  
© Gent Shkullaku/AFP via Getty Images

This level of radicalization, combined with involvement in drug trafficking and access to heavy weapons, suggests that the two brothers exemplify the nexus between violent extremism and organized crime. This case also points to the multifaceted nature of security threats in Lazarat, which go beyond cannabis cultivation. The situation of the Aliko brothers is particularly relevant to this discussion, as it took place in an area historically known for its specific criminal and socio-political context, but less well understood in terms of religious extremism. The convergence of these elements poses a complex challenge for law enforcement, highlighting how cases initially perceived as mere marriages of convenience between two phenomena can reveal deeper and more structured associations, within which unofficial mosques serve as important spaces for radicalization.



## CONCLUSION

**T**he countries of the Western Balkans are experiencing the troubling integration of criminal elements into state institutions, where far-right violent extremist groups have forged links with high-ranking officials, including members of the police and government. These relationships undermine the integrity of law enforcement and weaken governance, creating significant obstacles to maintaining public order and justice. Politicians, particularly those with nationalist agendas, exploit the manpower provided by far-right groups to gain street credibility and to establish and control quasi-private militias. This exploitation not only empowers criminal networks but also destabilizes the political landscape by introducing elements of coercion and violence, further complicating efforts to enforce the law in the face of powerful criminal networks. The long period of impunity enjoyed by extremist figures due to their connections with state officials illustrates these challenges and fosters an environment in which criminal activities can thrive unchecked.

The lack of research on violent religious extremism from the perspective of organized crime – particularly on para-jamaats – and the connections between the local criminal milieu and supporters of international terrorist organizations – highlights a critical, often overlooked security risk. Despite the lower visibility of their activities, the groups and individuals analyzed here are involved in various criminal markets, including arms and drug trafficking, as well as money laundering, with the primary aim of financing terrorism. This situation makes the Western Balkan region a crucial logistical hub for global terrorism.

Moving forward, it is essential to address these hidden networks where they intersect, and to reflect more deeply on the complexities of countering extremism and organized crime as interrelated issues rather than as separate challenges. Existing initiatives, such as the Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye – a joint initiative of the EU and the Council of Europe aimed at enhancing security in the Western Balkans through the management and rehabilitation of violent extremist prisoners – would likely benefit from incorporating the risks associated with organized crime recruitment into their programme areas.<sup>181</sup>

### Recommendations

The broader societal implications of associations between violent extremism and organized crime are profound. The normalization of violence and criminality through these alliances undermines social stability, as public trust in law enforcement and government institutions erodes when criminal elements are perceived to operate with impunity and state sanction.

Based on the research conducted and given the complex intersection between violent extremism, organized crime and the socio-political landscape in the Western Balkans, the following recommendations have been developed to address these multifaceted challenges.

**Reform law enforcement agencies and the prison system.** The connection between law enforcement actors and violent extremist groups, particularly with police officers deeply involved in both organized crime activities and violence, poses a significant security threat. To mitigate this risk, police staff should receive mandatory training on identifying and disrupting extremist recruitment efforts. Intelligence-sharing between law enforcement and prison administrations should be streamlined, ensuring that extremist leaders cannot leverage criminal networks for financial and logistical support. A risk-based prison management approach is necessary, with high-risk radicalized inmates separated from the general population to prevent further recruitment. Despite programmes existing to prevent prisons from becoming breeding grounds for further radicalization, the cases analyzed in this research indicate that some prison systems in the Western Balkans are failing to uphold high standards of integrity. While addressing radicalization is crucial, these programmes would benefit from incorporating current knowledge of the links between radicalization and organized crime.

**Strengthen international cooperation.** Participation in international forums, such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum, is a crucial step towards sharing best practices and resources. However, to improve the effectiveness of national intelligence services and achieve a higher level of impact in countering extremism and organized crime, the knowledge gained from international conferences must be translated into joint operations and training programmes with international law enforcement agencies. This collaboration should occur both within the region and, in particular, with organizations such as the UNODC, Interpol, Europol, Eurojust and the Council of Europe. A regional financial intelligence hub is needed to track illicit money flows, particularly those linked to para-jamaats and violent extremist entities operating through informal transfer systems. To incentivize cooperation, intelligence-sharing on counter-extremism should be integrated into EU accession negotiations. Standardizing mutual legal assistance agreements would improve extradition and prosecution efforts, while mandatory joint training programmes with European security institutions would strengthen operational coordination.

**Encourage research on violent extremism, emphasizing its connection to organized crime.** Much of the existing literature focuses on the security threats posed by violent extremism as a standalone phenomenon. However, an in-depth analysis of the nexus between violent extremism and organized crime is underestimated and crucial. The introduction of data-driven early-warning systems would allow authorities to detect collaboration between extremists and criminals by monitoring financial transactions, social media activity and recruitment trends. Security agencies should be required to publish annual threat assessments to inform adaptive policymaking. Stronger collaboration between academia, civil society and law enforcement is essential, with structured funding for interdisciplinary research projects that produce actionable intelligence. Research grants should prioritize policy-oriented studies that offer practical recommendations for counterterrorism and organized crime prevention strategies.

**Develop comprehensive socio-political strategies.** Socio-economic programmes that address the root causes of extremism and organized crime – such as poverty, unemployment and lack of education – should include the promotion of inclusive governance and ensure that marginalized communities have access to economic and social opportunities. Community-led prevention initiatives must be institutionalized, focusing on youth mentorship and engagement to prevent recruitment. Governments

should enforce stricter oversight of foreign-funded religious and political organizations to ensure transparency and prevent external radical influences. Schools should incorporate counter-radicalization education into curriculums, equipping students with critical thinking skills to resist extremist narratives. Public information campaigns should be launched to expose the dangers of extremist and criminal networks, leveraging social and mainstream media to counteract their propaganda.

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